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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000328

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BA](#) [POL](#) [HUMRIT](#)
SUBJECT: PROMINENT SHIAS PAINT GLOOMY PICTURE OF SHIA
OUTLOOK IN BAHRAIN

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

1. (S) Summary. Prominent Shia cleric Shaikh Hussein Najati, in an April 4 discussion with the Ambassador, painted a gloomy picture of Shia prospects under King Hamad. At the top of his concerns was an allegedly expanding policy of "political naturalizations" of foreign Sunni aimed at redressing the sectarian imbalance in the country. Additionally, he decried continuing examples of discrimination against Shia, most notably a recent ban on purchases of property in his home governorate of Muharraq (allegedly aimed at preventing Shia from expanding its presence in the mixed governorate), and continuing bans on hiring of Shia in Bahrain's military and security agencies. Surprisingly, he suggested that policies towards Shia under King Hamad are leading some Shia to re-think their views of Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa, long viewed as anti-Shia. In the 30 years when the PM was at the peak of his power (before the accession of King Hamad), he said, there were no "political naturalizations" and Shia held prominent positions in Bahrain's state-controlled corporations (many are now being replaced). Shaikh Najati said that Shia are getting restless about the performance of the Shia Al-Wifaq bloc in the parliament, assessing that Al-Wifaq has so far done little to advance Shia interests. He predicted that the government will actually seek ways to increase support for the rejectionist Shias in order to split the Shia and weaken Al-Wifaq. He emphasized that Bahrain's Shia are loyal to Bahrain, not Iran; want justice and respect, not power; and are friendly to the U.S. While Shaikh Najati represents a relatively small portion of Bahrain's Shia, and competes with but does not threaten leading Shia cleric Shaikh Issa Qassim, his sentiments do in many ways reflect concerns that are being felt, and often articulated to varying degrees, by many Shia in Bahrain these days. End summary.

2. (C) Bahraini religious cleric of Iranian origin, Shaikh Hussein Najati, asked to meet with the Ambassador recently to discuss his frustrations in particular, and Bahraini Shia frustrations more generally, in the current political climate in Bahrain. The discussion was hosted by prominent Shia businessman Faisal Jawad, and also attended by Abdul Hussain Faraj, a retired senior BAPCO official (also Shia).

3. (C) Najati, who lives in the Muharraq governorate, opened the discussion by complaining about the government's decision to ban the sale of property to Shia in Muharraq. (Note: the issue first surfaced in January when the press reported that Shia, allegedly with Iranian support, were buying up property in Muharraq in order to alter the sectarian balance in the governorate. The Governor of Muharraq subsequently declared a ban on the buying and selling of real estate in the old town area of Halat Abi Maher. He claimed that this decision was not sectarian-based and aimed only at preserving historical sites. The Governor's statement notwithstanding, it is widely believed in Bahrain that the decision was aimed

at preventing Shia from buying property in the area. Najati maintained that the ban encompassed all of Muharraq, and not just Halat Abi Maher. End note.) Najati told the Ambassador that he delivered a critical Friday sermon on the subject, comparing the situation in Muharraq to that in Palestine. This clearly hit a raw nerve, generating a fierce reaction among Sunni Islamists, and sharp editorial attacks in the non-Shia Arabic press, including Al-Watan, Akhbar Al-Khaleej, and Al-Ayam. Najati, echoed by Jawad and Faraj, decried this continuing example of discrimination against Shia.

14. (S) Turning to the labor situation, Najati complained about the lack of trust of Shia shown by the government in its failure to hire Shia in the armed forces. Jawad then described an incident that in his view highlighted the depth of the problem. He said that Minister of Labor Majeed Al-Alawi, himself a Shia who had returned from exile in London after the King introduced his reform program, approached the head of the National Guard, Shaikh Mohammed bin Issa Al-Khalifa (brother of the King), to request that the National Guard hire one or two Shia as a symbolic step to help ease pressure in the Shia community. Shaikh Mohammed refused, and allegedly added that the Shia should understand and appreciate that he could have -- but didn't -- let go of all Sunni in the National Guard who were married to Shia. Jawad scoffed at the government's distrust of Shia in the security forces, claiming that the police have hired numerous Shia to work undercover in the villages, and these Shia have always worked loyally for the government.

15. (C) Najati stated that the biggest concern for Shia in Bahrain at the current time is the increasing naturalization of Sunnis aimed at restoring the Sunni-Shia sectarian balance. Najati claimed that as many as 100,000 Sunni have

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been naturalized since the King came to power in 2000. (Note: In a country of an estimated 430,000 Bahrainis, this figure appears wildly exaggerated. During the election campaign last fall, there were complaints that some 5,000 Sunnis had their naturalization rushed through. An Al-Wifaq official recently put the overall figure at 38,000 in recent years. The government maintains that naturalizations have been limited and according to the law. There are no statistics available, but anecdotally there does appear to have been an effort to push through naturalizations of Sunnis -- many with long-standing applications - in recent months. End note.) Najati alleged that Sunnis are being drawn from several countries, including villages in Syria. He said that, for him, the problem of "political naturalization" of Sunnis is of higher concern at the current time than political reform.

16. (S) In discussing the current Bahraini leadership, Najati stated that recent moves by the government are causing some Shia to rethink their attitude towards Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa, who has long been viewed as squarely in the anti-Shia camp. It has been noted, he stated, that however bad things were for Shia in the past during the entire 30-year period when Shaikh Khalifa was running the country as Prime Minister before King Hamad acceded to the throne, there were no political naturalizations of Sunni during that period. Now, Sunni naturalizations are continuing unabated. Further, during the entire period when Shaikh Khalifa was at the peak of his power, qualified Shia occupied powerful positions in Bahrain's major state-controlled corporations such as BAPCO and Batelco (Abdul Hussein Faraj, one of the interlocutors in this discussion, is a good example, having worked for many years at the oil company BAPCO). Since King Hamad took over, these senior Shia are being systematically replaced by Al-Khalifas and other Sunnis, a trend that is also being seen in regulatory boards and similar agencies. Najati stated that, while Shia supported the King fully when he introduced his constitutional reforms, now 98 percent of Shia do not trust him. He alleged that the Crown Prince, despite his seemingly professional and technocratic approach

to issues such as economic reform, is already demonstrating a familiar Al-Khalifa tendency to enrich himself in personal business deals (especially involving property).

17. (C) Regarding the parliament, Najati said that Shia were getting restless about the performance of the 17-member Al-Wifaq bloc, assessing that Al-Wifaq has done little so far to advance Shia interests. He said that Shia will give Al-Wifaq more time, but that patience will run out. He speculated that the government will not proactively reach out to help Al-Wifaq, but will rather help build up Al-Wifaq rival Hussein Mushaima (who rejected participation in the 2006 parliamentary elections) so that his Harakat Haq group could serve as a counterweight to Al-Wifaq and divide the Shia movement in half. One way the government could do this, he added, would be to arrest Mushaima, helping make him a hero to the rejectionist Shia.

18. (C) Najati concluded the discussion by making three points. First, the Shia are loyal to Bahrain, not Iran as the government often alleges. Second, the Shia do not want power, they want justice and respect. He returned to that point several times. Third, the Shia are friendly to the United States.

19. (C) Comment: Shaikh Najati is not the leading Shia cleric in Bahrain, and has considerably less overall influence than Shaikh Issa Qassim. Some of his points are clearly exaggerated, most notably his figures on political naturalization. Nonetheless, the fact that this meeting was brokered by two successful, rather mainstream Shia in Bahrain underscores that his sentiments reflect concerns that are being felt, and often articulated to various degrees, by many Shia in Bahrain. On the Sunni side, there are those who favor a hard-line approach towards the Shia, especially in the royal family. But there are many others who do recognize the need to work together to develop a more harmonized Bahrain. At this point, it is not clear who ultimately will get the upper hand among the Sunni leadership as it charts its policy towards the Shia majority.

10. (C) Biographic information on Shaikh Hussain Najati: Shaikh Najati is a Bahraini religious scholar of Iranian origin. He and his family are long-time residents of Muharraq in Bahrain, although he was in exile in Iran for many years and did not return to Bahrain until 2001. He has considerable influence among the Shia community in Muharraq, and the majority of his followers are Shia of Iranian origin. He is somewhat isolated from religious scholars of Arab origin. He in some ways competes with leading Shia cleric

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Shaikh Issa Qassim, but has a considerably smaller number of followers and so is not a threat for overall leadership of the Shia community in Bahrain. He claims that he was given the ranking of Ayatollah in Qom, but many in the Shia community in Bahrain question this. He reportedly has had good relations with the Prime Minister's Court and the Crown Prince's Court.

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